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Helms lauded as conscience of Senate conservatives

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RALEIGH, N.C. -- Jesse Helms says it is presumptuous to acknowledge that he was what admirers say he was: the conscience of conservatives in the Senate for 30 years.

"I would never have presumed to take on the role of 'conscience,'" the North Carolina Republican says.

But he did just that, bucking Democratic and Republican administrations, blocking treaties and arms agreements, presidential appointments and domestic legislation whenever he thought they jeopardized limited government, national defense or civilized standards of behavior.

From virtually his first day in the Senate in January 1973, his insistence on principle was at times so politically incorrect as to exasperate whoever happened to occupy the Oval Office and to embarrass colleagues on the right whose spines might be less stiff than his.

He tells the story of when the newly inaugurated President Clinton clasped his hand, looked him in the eyes and said: "Senator, I'm so happy to meet you, because we have so much in common."

Mr. Helms recalls his reply: "Mr. President, you must be mistaking me for another senator. My name is Helms. H-E-L-M-S."

Retired from the Senate since 2003, Mr. Helms enters his office here for an interview with the aid of a walker, but still firmly defends his conservative principles.

"I am a conservative first," says Mr. Helms, 83. "I was a conservative Democrat before I became a conservative Republican. And, following the 1976 elections, I was chairman of a committee to consider the formation of a national conservative party. We didn't go forward because Ronald Reagan wanted to stay in the Republican Party and fight for its nomination."

In the 1976 Republican presidential-nomination fight, Mr. Helms and his state political organization, the Congressional Club, now known as the National Congressional Club, helped Mr. Reagan score a key primary win in North Carolina. Though Mr. Reagan eventually lost the nomination to President Ford, his North Carolina victory proved to be a turning point.

"The folks in North Carolina helped get Ronald Reagan to the White House by giving him their votes in the 1976 presidential primary," Mr. Helms says. "Winning that election kept Reagan in the race and positioned him for a successful campaign in 1980."

The 1976 campaign brought together the emerging Republican coalition of economic conservatives, national-defense hawks, and churchgoers concerned about social issues.

But the Reagan era that established the GOP as America's conservative party ended 16

years ago. As for whether it is still America's conservative party, Mr. Helms says: "People make that presumption, but they should be vigilant if they want that to remain true."

Citing a phrase from Thomas Jefferson frequently invoked by Mr. Reagan, Mr. Helms says: "My friend Ron once said the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. That idea is no less important if the Republican Party wants to remain the party of the Reagan legacy."

He adds: "Of course, there are people who want to take the party back to its complacent, compromising ways, so conservatives must be watchful."

Unlike Patrick J. Buchanan, who shares many of Mr. Helms' views but talks about the conservative movement in the past tense, Mr. Helms says the movement is alive and healthier than ever. At the same time, he says, "The greatest challenge to conservatism is the same one it has always faced -- big government. It will always be the challenge."

A pioneering figure in shifting the South's political allegiance to the Republican Party, Mr. Helms doesn't see his conservatism as regional. He voices no special interest in Civil War history, saying: "I have always been much more interested in our founders, especially in the writings of Thomas Jefferson."

And, while having staunchly defended the United Daughters of the Confederacy in a 1993 dispute, he said Southerners are better off for the Union victory that ended slavery - - which he described as a step forward in human progress.

"Of course, we are all better off to be living in a country where freedom for all individuals is the law of the land," he said. "We are better off with the defeat of communism. Imagine how much better off we will be when once again unborn children can be safe from the destruction of abortion."

Best known as a defender of the conservative faith on foreign policy, he says he "felt pretty good the day our bills to reorganize the State Department and to rein in spending at the United Nations were passed."

Those two achievements are an important part of Mr. Helms' legacy: putting the Senate back at the center of U.S. foreign-policy decisions, where he thinks the Constitution intended it to be. Over the years, he says, the Senate had ceded that role to the executive branch and rarely questioned the White House or the State Department's initiatives.

From his first weeks in the Senate, when he expressed his concern over the content of the Paris Peace Accords that Henry Kissinger negotiated with North Vietnam's communist government, Mr. Helms says he purposely took on foreign-policy issues. A member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he eventually became the committee's most visible and assertive chairman in recent memory.

He used his own staff and that of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to gather facts about the threat of communism in Latin America and in Africa and about the impact at home and abroad of proposed treaties and agreements. His staffs' reports often ran counter to those of the State Department and often proved to be more accurate.

He traveled abroad extensively, establishing cordial relations with many foreign leaders. When the Jesse Helms Center in Wingate, N.C., was dedicated in the spring of 2001, Margaret Thatcher showed up to stand beside her longtime friend and political ally.

Mr. Helms became a North Carolina celebrity as a TV and radio commentator, a pioneer in the field of conservative broadcasting that since has flourished with Rush Limbaugh and other talk-radio hosts and TV pundits.

After he was elected to the Senate in 1972, he helped organize fellow conservatives

into something called the Senate Republican Steering Committee, which started with only three members but is now the conservative nerve center in the Senate.

Mr. Helms says he came to the Senate determined "that the folks back home" learn how their senators actually vote -- a determination that led to one of the most unusual pacts in Senate history, involving himself, New York Sen. James Buckley, a member of the Conservative Party, and Virginia Sen. Harry Byrd Jr., a conservative Democrat turned independent.

"We agreed that one of us would always be on the floor of the Senate during any call for a vote and we would insist on a roll call, instead of a voice vote," Mr. Helms says, adding that the pact applied only to important measures, lest the Senate become overly deliberative.

He says he vowed from the beginning to measure his actions and speech in the Senate against the two documents he kept on his desk and referred to often: his Bible and copy of the Constitution.

Mr. Helms doesn't dispute other conservatives who say that, despite many notable successes, the conservative movement is fighting a rear-guard action when it comes to the growth of government and preservation of personal freedoms.

But, he says, "this is a marathon, not a sprint. Conservatives have a responsibility to be a vital part of the dialogue on every issue and at all times. There's no finish line to cross as long as our nation is a constitutional democracy."